

'We've had no one like him since'

Steve Holland

A QUARTER CENTURY after his death, Americans still cannot heal the psychological wound left by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

For millions, those few seconds between life and death in Dallas remain vivid memories, and the 25th anniversary of the assassination brings a return of the agony, reflections on what might have been, and a lingering fascination with conspiracy theories.

"America needs heroes as all countries need heroes. John Kennedy pursued a standard of excellence that Americans believe this country should pursue," said Ted Sorensen, who wrote many of Kennedy's speeches. "We haven't had anyone like him since."

Most Americans are reliving November 22, 1963, the day of his assassination, on television — appropriately, since Kennedy's was the first televised presidency.

An array of programmes has marked the anniversary. The most painful was CBS television's two-hour digest of its 56 hours of live coverage: the shocking news bulletin that broke into a soap opera with a report that shots had been fired, the news that he was dead, the arrest and later killing of Lee Harvey Oswald, and finally Kennedy's flag-draped coffin rolling to its final resting place aboard a horse-drawn caisson.

Though the 1,000-day Kennedy rule has been dubbed "Camelot" to represent a legendary period of national good feeling and pride, it was a time rife with troubles that had the young president staring down the gun barrel.

"I don't think he would have paid any attention to this Camelot sentimentality, because his years were tough years," said his secretary of state, Dean Rusk. He had his feet on the ground. The world came to the brink of nuclear war with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, but Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was forced to back down. The previous year, Kennedy badly bungled the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

Tackling the divisive issue of equal rights for



blacks, he forced reluctant southern states to accept integration, but he was slow to do so.

HE CHALLENGED Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you..." and inspired the landing of a man on the moon (which eventually took place in 1969) as well as the creation of the Peace Corps. With Communists on the move in Vietnam, he began the U.S. military presence there. Some historians think if he had survived to serve a second term, he would never have got bogged down there as did his successors Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

"John F. Kennedy was very conscious of the fact that he was the first president to be born in the 20th century," Rusk said in a telephone interview.

"He thought of himself as representing a new generation on the scene so he tended to take a fresh look at the policies since World War Two and was willing to take fresh initiatives.

"He was an incandescent man. He tended to set people around him on fire, although in moments of crisis he had ice water in his veins," Rusk said.

Some experts postulate that Kennedy's death led to a sense of national decline by many of that generation, a bitterness intensified by the prolonged involvement in Vietnam."

Frederick Goodwin, a psychiatrist and scientific director of the National Institute of Mental Health, said this "unravelling of our shared sense of national well-being" began with the assassination and ultimately led to higher crime, increased depression, experimentation with drugs and a doubling in the divorce rate.

"My generation has not healed fully from that deep wound, inflicted during our youth, by the wrenching loss of John Kennedy," he wrote in an article for *The Washington Post*.

"Whatever the ultimate historical judgment of Kennedy as a president, he was a man who generated such emotion that most Americans over the age of 30 — as well as many non-Americans — can remember in minute detail what they were doing when the country's youngest president was slain at the age of 46. I have taken people to his grave from all over the world, from Japan, Latin America, the Soviet Union, and what amazes me is that they all tell us what they were doing and what was happening around them when Kennedy was assassinated," said Kelly Childress, historian at Arlington cemetery, where four million people a year pause at the Kennedy grave.

Among the images of those traumatic days in November that people cannot forget, Jacqueline Kennedy's anguish stands out. Her blood-spattered clothes and her beautiful face contorted with shock and grief in the open car in which John Kennedy was shot dead next to her, the fortitude with which she stood, frozen in pain, in the plane next to Lyndon Johnson as he was sworn in as president, and her demeanour at the state funeral as she watched her husband buried — these moments refuse to fade from the collective consciousness of America and the world.

(Reuters)